DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 093 024 CS 500 772

AUTHOR Weitzel, Al R.
TITLE In Search of a "Theory" of Campaign Communication.
PUB DATE Apr 74
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (19th, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 17-20, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Patterns; *Communication (Thought Transfer); Elections; Higher Education; *Models; *Political Issues; *Research Methodology; Research Tools; *Theories

ABSTRACT

Some distinct advantages in utilizing theory-oriented research as opposed to nontheoretic data gathering research are examined in this paper. Further, the need for theory-based research is suggested by defining the nature of theory and by reviewing two theory-oriented research developments. The funnel model of causality from the area of political science and the social judgment-involvement approach from communication are cited as examples of theory-oriented research development. This document concludes with a brief illustration of how theory building may be approached. (Author/RB)

ED 093024

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

In Search of a "Theory" of Campaign Communication

Al R. Weitzel
Department of Speech Communication
San Diego State University
San Diego, California 92115

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Al R. Weitzel
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER

International Communication Association
New Orleans

April, 1974

CS 500 772

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

In Search of a "Theory" of Campaign Communication

Abstract

The paper recounts some distinct advantages in utilizing theory-oriented research as opposed to atheoretic data gathering research. Further, the need for theory-based research is suggested by defining the nature of theory and by reviewing two theory-oriented research developments. One example is in the area of political science (the funnel model of causality,) and the other is oriented toward communication, (the social judgment-involvement approach). Lastly, a study is briefly reported as an illustration of how theory building may be approached.

In Search of a "Theory" of Campaign Communication

A number of recent behavioral studies of contemporary political campaign communication indicates an increased interest in use of empirical methodologies to examine political communication phenomena. This paper recounts some distinct advantages in utilizing theory-oriented research as opposed to atheoretic data gathering research. Further, the need for theory-based research is suggested by defining the nature of theory and by reviewing two theory-oriented research developments.

I.

Miller (1964) and King (1973) have emphasized the advantages of theory-oriented research over atheoretic data gathering. Utilizing theory in research:

1. gives direction to research.
2. increases the likelihood of generalizing beyond the sample used.
3. provides for an orderly extension of the boundaries of knowledge.
4. increases the probability of discovering general laws.
5. provides a basis for direct comparison of theories.
6. facilitates comparison of research results.
7. "and possibly most important, . . . focuses the researcher's initiative on understanding a phenomenon and not on finding a phenomenon that will demonstrate the utility of his favorite theory (King, 1973, p. 21)."

In short, theory-oriented research requires precise and parsimonious thinking and research and allows for consistent building efforts rather than encouraging helter-skelter correlations between, for example, charisma derived from the color of a candidate's eyes and the dominant ethnic background of voters in selected precincts.

Having suggested the advantages of the use of theory, there is a need for some common understanding of the nature of theory. The term "theory" is used in a number of different ways (Marx, 1963). It may be used in a very broad sense to refer to any conceptual thinking process. For example, one might refer to a "theory about speech making." In a narrower sense, "theory" may refer to any generalized principle or statement about factors or variables. For example, one might say: "I have a theory about why jokes aren't used in more sermons." However, the term "theory" in this paper is used in a stricter sense to emphasize two major characteristics.

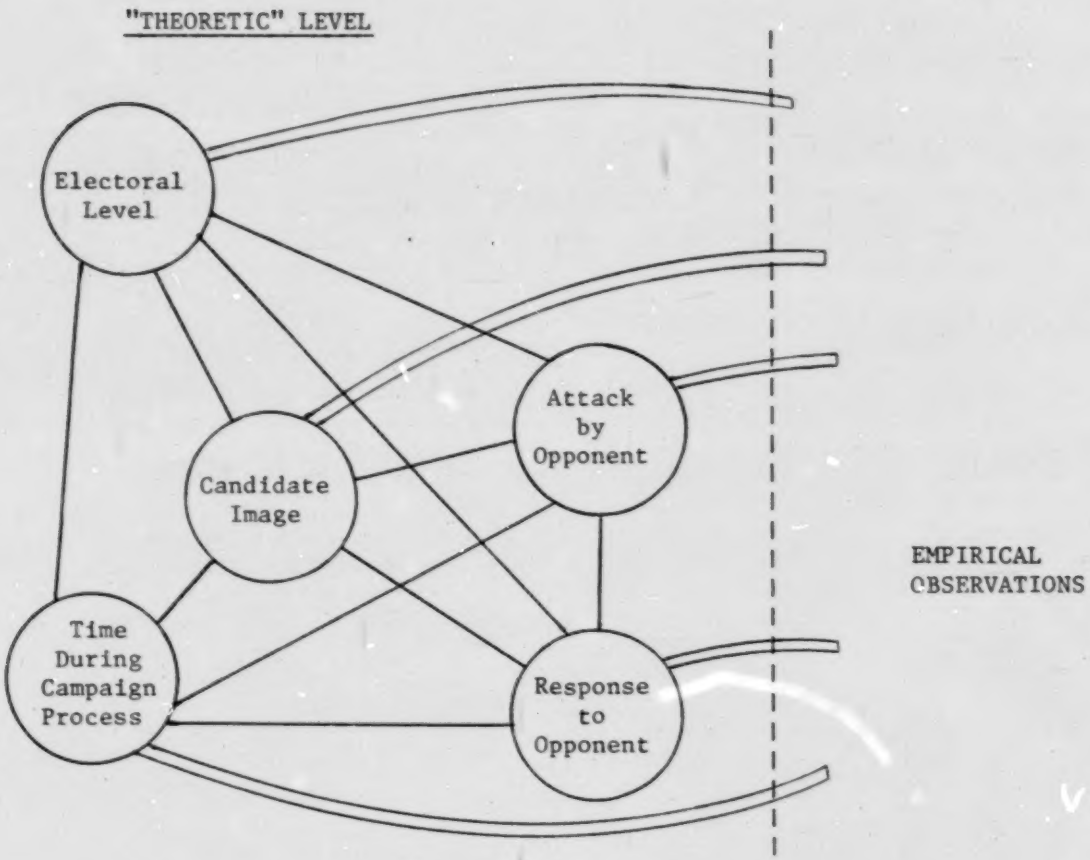
1. "Theory" refers to an overall system or model which includes underpinnings to presuppositions (Kaplan, 1964, p. 86).

For example, researchers should distinguish between Lewin's field theory as a model of research (Campbell, Converse, Miller, Stokes, 1960) and Stephenson's "play theory of mass communication" (Stephenson, 1967). The former emphasizes the perceptions of voters at a particular time. The latter is based in part on Freudian psychology and in part on Huizinga's ludenic behavior (1950). The conceptual and research assumptions differ radically, and research findings derived from one "theory" ought to be distinguished from those of other "theories."

2. "A theory is a set of interrelated constructs (concepts), definitions, and propositions that presents a systematic view [or model] of phenomena by specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining and predicting the phenomena (Kerlinger, 1965, p. 11)."

That is, a theory, in the sense used here: would identify concepts within a system or model; would operationally define the concepts as constructs; and would hypothesize and ultimately empirically describe (now or in the future) and predict the relationships between concepts. For example, Marshall McLuhan's "theory" of media might not qualify within the conception of theory discussed here. It would be difficult to operationalize some of the concepts that he discusses, such as "hot" and "cool" media. However, a "theory" of campaign communication, in the sense discussed here, would ultimately describe, explain and predict, for example, the effect on a candidate's image (operationalized as the findings of a poll, perhaps) if he ignored an attack (of a particular type) by his opponent at a specified time during the campaign when he appears to be winning/losing. The "ideal" theory of the future would probably distinguish between effects on varying electoral levels (local, state, etc.), would discriminate between incumbent and non-incumbent candidates, and between other factors (Jones, 1962). This type of theory is consistent with the type described by Deutsch and Krauss (1965) as a "multiply-connected set of constructs (p. 9)." (See Figure 1)

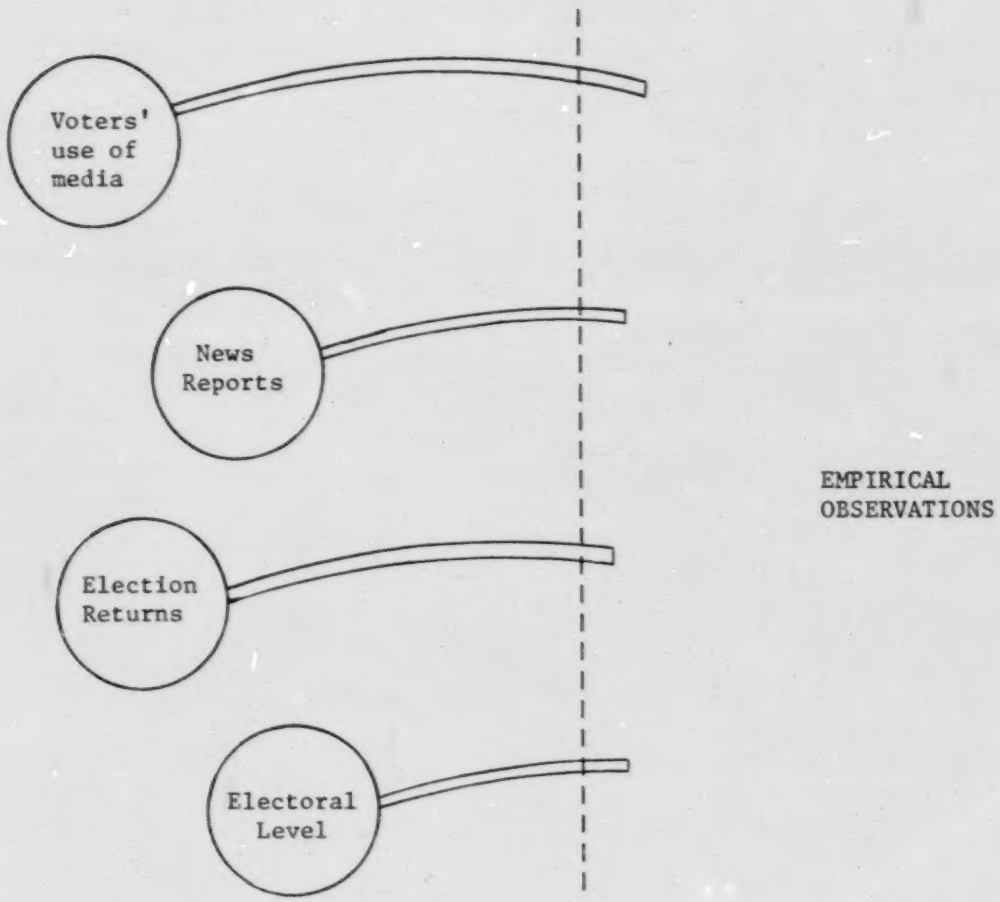
FIGURE 1



The single lines represent some possible logical connections between concepts in a systematic model or theory. The double lines represent operationalized linkages to observable data.

Some campaign "theorizing" and research may fail to emphasize a system or model, and/or operationalized constructs, and/or propositional statements about the relationships between concepts or variables. For example, See Figure 2.

FIGURE 2



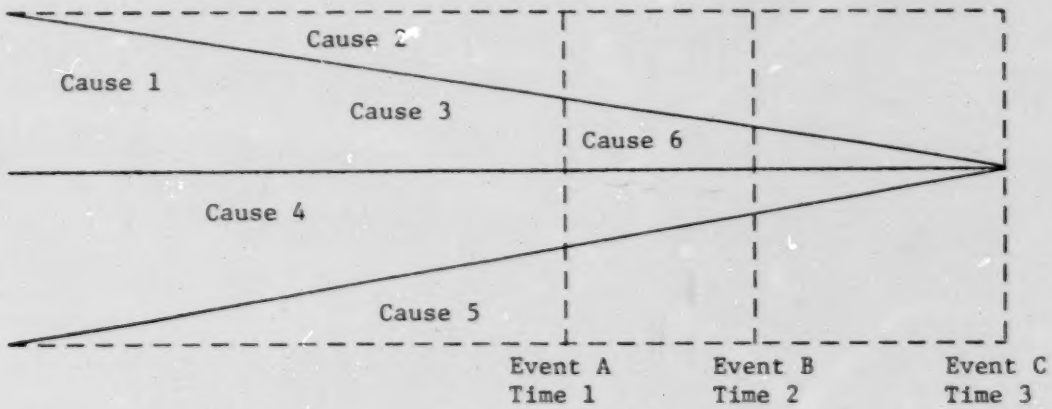
This type of thinking and research may accurately be called atheoretic or nontheoretic and does not have the advantages of theory orientation which were discussed earlier.

II.

Two examples of theory-oriented research developments may serve to demonstrate the utility of the approach discussed above: one example is in the area of political science and the other is oriented toward communication.

The investigators of the Survey Research Center adopted a theoretic framework in their second major effort in researching Presidential elections, The American Voter (1960). This work by Campbell, et. al. was actually an extension of the conceptual framework employed in their earlier study, The Voter Decides (1954), but in the second work the authors made an effort to set forth their theoretic framework in greater detail than previously. A model was utilized which they called "the funnel of causality (p. 24)." The model was based upon Kurt Lewin's field theory (p. 33). Whereas the previous major efforts to research Presidential campaigns, The People's Choice by Lazarsfeld, et. al. (1944) and Voting by Berelson, et. al. (1954), had been largely based upon sociological, advertising, and propaganda research interests, The Voter Decides and The American Voter were based more on social-psychological and political research interests (Rossi, 1959). This paper does not attempt to explain the full set of presuppositions which accompany the funnel model and the use of field theory, but a brief description may clarify the theoretic framework's essential characteristics.

FIGURE 3



The model assumes that most events have many causes and that a single cause may have multiple effects. The model is designed to identify the major causes of a single event at a particular slice of time. For example, in Figure 3 the research objectives are to identify the factors which contribute to voting behavior at Time 3. The procedure in identifying major causes includes elimination of some possible factors which are not helpful in understanding the voting act, thus creating the shape of the funnel. Some factors are relevant and others are irrelevant or "exogenous," (such as Cause 2 in Figure 3). For example, a voter's flat tire on the way to the polls may cause him not to vote,

but this is not regarded as a relevant factor in the investigation of voting behavior. Further, some conditions are external to the voter and others are personal. The researchers regarded external conditions which were outside of the perception of a voter as exogenous to their theoretic framework, (such as Cause 5 in Figure 3). For example, a candidate's efforts in planning media strategy are only relevant to the extent that they manifest themselves within the perceptions of a voter. Finally, the chief focus of the model is on political conditions, and non-political conditions were of less concern to them. The extent to which a condition is "political" is determined by a voter's perceptions. For example, an economic development, such as the fluctuation of the stock market, may or may not be viewed as a political condition by a voter. Thus, in brief, a voter's political attitudes are measured "on the assumption that this is a perfect distillation of all events in the individual's life history that have borne upon the way in which he relates himself to a political party (Campbell, et. al., 1960, p. 34)."

This theory-oriented model and the resulting research contributed to the complex set of propositions reported by the staff of the Survey Research Center in The American Voter, Elections and the Political Order (1966), and elsewhere. Some of the propositions have been reassessed by subsequent research. For example, Key (1968), Repass (1971), and Boyd (1972) reassessed the importance of issues in elections. Burnham (1970) and Kramer (1971) argued that economic characteristics of voters interact with "critical realignments" and "short-term fluctuations" (respectively) to significantly affect electoral behavior. However, the conceptual basis of the Survey Research Center's theory-oriented procedures may allow researchers to reconcile new research findings with previous perspectives. For example, Merelman (1970) argued that the findings of Key and others regarding electoral dynamism may be reconciled with the Survey Research Center's emphasis on partisanship and differing types of elections. In particular, he addressed himself to the following seeming contradictions:

1) The researchers of the SRC argue that a voter's political party is the key factor in predicting electoral behavior and that occasional deviating and realigning elections are exceptions to "normal" elections.

2) Pomper (1967) however found these concepts unreliable and demonstrated that "almost half (16 of 34) of our Presidential elections since 1832 may be classified as 'deviations' in one form or another (Merelman, 1970, p. 116)."

Merelman reconceptualized the functions of political parties and used additional data to make the seeming instability of elections predictable.

A second example of theory-oriented developments regards the theory of social judgment-involvement. Social judgment is a concept advanced in book-length form by Sherif and Hovland in Social Judgment: Assimilation and Contrast Effects of Communication and Attitude Change (1961). The approach was explicated and refined by Sherif, Sherif, and Nebergall in Attitude and Attitude Change: The Social Judgment-Involvement Approach (1965). The concept of social judgment is the product of a social attitude: "a set of evaluative categorizations formed toward an object or class of objects as the individual learns, in interaction with others, about his environment (p. 20)." Each individual forms his own evaluative system and the system, of course, includes a determination of his

most acceptable view or stand. This individual view serves as a standard or anchor by which to compare other stands; the process of making such comparisons is judgment.

In addition to acceptable positions in an attitude set, some positions are objectionable, i.e., rejected. Further, there are some positions on which an individual is not committed. These three categories of positions, acceptance, rejection and noncommitment, are characterized as latitudes which serve as an individual's anchor for judgment of communication. And the individual's assessment of a communication is, in turn, subject to assimilation-contrast effects.

> If the position of a communication does not diverge greatly from the latitude of acceptance, there is likelihood of an assimilation effect; it will be seen as nearer to the subject's stand. (p. 14)

The structure and ambiguity of the communication situation, and the individual's relationship to the communicator, among other factors, affect assimilation.

> If the position of a communication diverges sufficiently that it falls within the individual's latitude of rejection, the anchoring effect of his own stand will result in a contrast effect in placement of a communication; it will be seen as further away from the subject's stand. . . . Communication falling within the latitude of rejection is seen as discrepant by the subject, is appraised unfavorably as "unfair," "propagandistic," "biased," or even "false (p. 15)."

A contrast effect is largely determined by an individual's involvement in his stand and by his commitment. The concept of involvement is the main object of the latter volume by Sherif, et. al. Involvement has also received a good deal of attention in the area of communication, primarily by Sereno (1969) and his associates. No attempt will be made here to review the methodological issues and findings of ego-involvement research. Instead, a few selected aspects of the research by Sherif, et. al. will be mentioned as they relate to campaign communication. Attitude and Attitude Change reported research in which five different tape-recorded communications were presented to students within the classic pre-test and post-test laboratory paradigm. The speaker and length of the speech (approximately 15 minutes) were held constant. Partisanship and endorsement of stands on issues were varied. Issues included farm policy, civil rights, etc. Propositions about message variables and social judgment emerged from their studies. For example, clear statements of partisan arguments were not found to significantly affect receivers' judgments. But if the communication was "fence-straddling," that is, it refrained from endorsing either political party, "the predominant trend was to assimilate the communication toward own positions in proportion to the discrepancy between communication and own stand; this trend was less pronounced for highly involved persons (p. 167)." Further, communications which moderately endorsed a political party were found to be highly affected by ego-involvement.

> Assimilation effects were found for less-involved persons, but for highly involved respondents only when their own stand (latitude of acceptance) extended close to the position of the communication. Conversely, the contrast effects that occurred involved highly committed persons in each instance. In all cases, discrepancy between the communication and the individual's own stand was a significant factor (p. 167).

In addition to the research by Sherif, et. al., subsequent studies have utilized the theory of social judgment-involvement to explain Presidential campaign phenomena. For example, Carlson and Habel (1969) measured the opinion that students held of the 1964 Presidential candidates and found that this construct served as an anchor in judging the positions of candidates on twenty-six issues. In general their findings supported the predicted assimilation and contrast explanations. Supporters of a candidate tended to assimilate the issue positions of that candidate and to contrast the issue positions of the other candidate. In addition, Beck (1969) measured voters' perceptions of themselves and of 1968 Presidential candidates during early September and just prior to the election in November. He found that voters used their position on a liberal-conservative scale as an anchor in assimilating their preferred candidate's position on the scale and in contrasting other candidates' positions.

The theory of social judgement-involvement seems well supported by this research in explaining campaign phenomena on the Presidential electoral level. However, other research on lower electoral levels suggests that social judgment-involvement does not adequately explain campaign phenomena. In a preliminary analysis, this author earlier reported (1973) research on a state senate race in a western state. Among other things, a single candidate's image among random samples of 157 registered voters was measured at the midpoint of the campaign (Time 1) and again just prior to the election (Time 2). The study measured voters' perceived party identification, voters' ratings of the candidate's name recognition factor, and voters' image of the candidate. The latter two factors were measured by seven-interval semantic differential-type scales. The name recognition factor was measured on a known-unknown scale and candidate image was measured by the following scales: straightforward-devious, trustworthy-untrustworthy, real-phony, truthful-untruthful, industrious-lazy, and involved-uninvolved. The preliminary analysis revealed that the candidate did not become better known among voters from Time 1 to Time 2. A chi-square (contingency table) confirmed that the number of voters who were familiar with the candidate did not significantly increase.

TABLE 1

Number of Respondents Indicating Knowledge of the Candidate at Time 1 and Time 2

Sample	Known	Unknown
Time 1	73	63
Time 2	74	61

$(3.84 > x^2 = < 1, 1 \text{ d.f.}, p. > .05)$

Since a candidate's name recognition is associated with candidate image, the name recognition variable was used as a blocking factor in assessing the change in candidate image.

Social judgment-involvement would predict that a voter's perceived political party identification may act an an anchor in assessing a candidate's image. In this case the candidate was a Democrat, so if the theory is accurate Democratic voters would have assimilated his image and the image would tend to become significantly better during the campaign. Republicans should have contrasted the image and it would tend to be lower over time. The predictions were not substantiated by the data. Table 2 reports the sum of the candidate's image on the six semantic differential scales, and Table 3 reports the 2 x 2 x 3 analysis of variance.

TABLE 2

Image Means: Time, Candidate Name Recognition and Voters' Party Identification

Party	Time 1		Time 2	
	Known	Unknown	Known	Unknown
Republicans	33.3	26.6	30.9	24.8
Swing Voters	31.0	24.6	30.6	25.0
Democrats	35.2	24.9	34.2	24.0

Ratings scored six low, forty-two high

TABLE 3

Analysis of Variance: Voters' Party Identification, Candidate Name Recognition, and Time

N = 212

Source	SS	df	MS	F
Party (A)	672	2	336	< 1
Name Recognition (B)	2004	1	2004	4.80*
Time (C)	720	1	720	1.72
A x B	120	2	60	<1
A x C	0	2	0	<1
B x C	816	1	816	1.95
A x B x C	0	2	0	<1
Error	5009	12	417	

*$p < .05$; 4.75, 1, 12 df

Among other things, the ANOVA indicates that voters' political party affiliation does not significantly affect candidate image over time. Further, the ANOVA indicates that except for the name recognition factor, no single factor or interaction significantly affects voter image.

This research indicaces that some other theoretic framework besides social judgment-involvement should be utilized in examining the data, because this theory fails to account for changes in voters' image of a candidate on this level. Put another way, this level of the variable of electoral level is not explained by the theory. A different theory is probably needed to explain the phenomena on levels other than the Presidential level.

III.

In summary, this paper has suggested the nature and function of theory in campaign communication research and has tried to demonstrate the utility of theory with two examples. If this perspective has validity, future research might attempt to utilize previous theory-oriented bases and to develop new ones. Research might further focus on variables and propositions which are based as much on conceptual development as on data gathering.

REFERENCES

Beck, D. Polarization of political attitudes in the 1968 Presidential campaign. Paper presented at the meeting of the Speech Association of America, New York, December, 1969.

Berelson, B., Lazarsfeld, P., & McPhee, W. Voting. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1954.

Boyd, R. Popular Control of Public Policy: A Normal Vote Analysis of the 1968 Election. American Political Science Review, 1972, 66, 429-449.

Burnham, W. Critical Election and the Mainsprings of American Politics. New York: W. W. Norton, 1970.

Campbell, A., Gurin, G., & Miller, W. The Voter Decides. Evanston: Row, Peterson, 1955.

Campbell, A., Converse, P., Miller, W., & Stokes, D. The American Voter. New York: Wiley, 1960.

Campbell, A., et. al., Elections and the Political Order. New York: Wiley, 1966.

Carlson, E. & Habel, D. The Perception of Policy Positions of Presidential Candidates. J. of Social Psychology, 1969, 79, 69-77.

Deutsch, M. & Krauss, R. Theories in Social Psychology. New York: Basic, 1965.

Huizinga, J. Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture. Boston: Beacon, 1950.

Jones, C. A Suggested Scheme for Classifying Congressional Campaigns. Public Opinion Quarterly, 1962, 26, 126-132.

Kaplan, A. The Conduct of Inquiry. San Francisco: Chandler, 1964.

Kerlinger, F. Foundations of Behavioral Research. New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1964.

Key, V. The Responsible Electorate: Rationality in Presidential Voting, 1936-1960. New York: Random House, 1968.

King, S. Theory Testing: An Analysis and Extension. Western Speech, 1973, 37, 13-22.

Kramer, G. Short-term Fluctuations in U.S. Voting Behavior, 1896-1964. American Political Science Review, 1971, 65, 131-143.

Lazarsfeld, P., Berelson, B., & Gaudet, H. The People's Choice. New York: Columbia University, 1948.

Marx, M. The General Nature of Theory Construction. In L. Barker and R. Kibler, (ed.), Speech Communication Behavior. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971.

Merelman, R. Electoral Instability and the American Party System. Journal of Politics, 1970, 32, 115-139.

Miller, G. Theory in Quantitative Speech Research. Western Speech, 1964, 28, 15-22.

Pomper, G. Classification of Presidential Elections. Journal of Politics, 1967, 29, 535-567.

Repass, D. Issue Salience and Party Choice. American Political Science Review, 1971, 65, 389-400.

Rossi, P. Four Landmarks in Voting Research. In E. Burdick and A. Brodbeck, (ed.), American Voting Behavior. Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1959.

Sereno, K. Ego-involvement: A Neglected Variable in Speech Communication Research. Quarterly Journal of Speech, 1969, 55, 69-77.

Sherif, M. & Hovland, C. Social Judgment: Assimilation and Contrast Effects in Communication and Attitude Change. New Haven: Yale University, 1961.

Sherif, C., Sherif, M., & Nebergall, R. Attitude and Attitude Change: The Social Judgment-involvement Approach. Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1965.

Stephenson, W. The Play Theory of Mass Communication. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1967.

Weitzel, A. Candidate and electorate perceptions of the nature and function of media messages: A case study approach. Paper presented at the meeting of the International Communication Association, Montreal, April, 1973.